

# NEW BEGINNINGS LUTHERAN CHURCH

Fourth Sunday of Easter – “Good Shepherd Sunday” – April 21<sup>st</sup>, 2024 (11:11 am)

## NOT A SHEPHERD BUT THE GOOD SHEPHERD

Psalms 23  
Acts 4:1-12  
1 John 3:16-24  
John 10:11-18

### **Jesus, the Good Shepherd, Lays Down His Life for the Sheep**

The Lord Jesus is “the good shepherd” who “lays down his life for the sheep” (John 10:11). His life is not taken from Him, but He lays it down willingly, of His own accord, because He knows and loves the sheep. As the One sent by the Father, He has the “authority to lay it down” and the “authority to take it up again” (John 10:18). So has He done, and now He continues to love and serve as the Good Shepherd of the sheep by the voice of His Gospel. He thus calls all people into the fold of His Church, so that there may be “one flock, one shepherd” (John 10:16). That is why the apostles “were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead” (Acts 4:2). Since “there is salvation in no one else,” His voice rings out to this day through the preaching of His name, “for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). His voice comforts our hearts against all condemnation and gives us courage to “love one another” and “to lay down our lives for the brothers,” as He laid down His life for us (1 John 3:16, 23).

As we listen to our gospel lesson once more this morning, I’d like to focus on the difference between good shepherds and hired hands; that is, between those who care for the sheep out of a genuine sense of compassion and love, and those who care only because of the benefits – benefits for them, and not for the sheep!

The text begins, “***I am the good shepherd...***” What we need to know is that, in Jesus’ day, the term “Good Shepherd” would have been heard as an oxymoron<sup>1</sup> – in other words, a contradiction of terms. (**oxymoron** - a combination of contradictory or incongruous words - such as “cruel kindness”, “Silent Scream” or “Terribly good one”). In Jesus’ day, shepherds were considered outliers. They were nomads, often grazing their sheep on other people’s land. They were careless about the Jewish food laws (**Kosher**<sup>2</sup>), they didn’t practice ritual cleansing, and they certainly didn’t attend synagogue on the Sabbath.

And so, for Jesus to identify himself as a shepherd is quite remarkable. It goes along with his willingness to befriend the outcast, touch the leper, and eat with tax collectors and sinners. It speaks of Jesus’ humility, and his desire to become one of us to redeem us from our sinful nature and give us the grace to become more like him. The apostle Paul said it best when he wrote to the Philippians, “**... Christ Jesus, who, existing in the form of God, didn’t consider equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant...**” (Philippians 2:6-7).

Or, in the case of today’s text, taking the form of a shepherd, better, and not just any shepherd, but the Good Shepherd.

All this is to say, we don’t have to be perfect to walk in Jesus’ company; he meets us where we are. The Good News is, we are accepted by faith, independent of our works, the life that we have, our financial

<sup>1</sup> **Definition of oxymoron** - a combination of contradictory or incongruous words (such as *cruel kindness*) broadly : something (such as a concept) that is made up of contradictory or incongruous elements - <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/oxymoron>

<sup>2</sup> “**Kosher**” is a term used to describe food that complies with the strict dietary standards of traditional Jewish law. For many Jews, **kosher** is about more than just health or food safety. It is about reverence and adherence to religious tradition. That said, not all Jewish communities adhere to strict **kosher** guidelines. <https://www.healthline.com/nutrition/what-is-kosher#:~:text=E%3D%20Kosher%20is%20a%20term%20used,adhere%20to%20strict%20kosher%20guidelines.>

situation, what ethnic group we belong to, our ideology, status, age, whatever... In his letter to Timothy, Paul said, ***“The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost.”*** (1 Timothy 1:15).

Jesus became one of us to redeem us from our sinful nature and give us the grace to become more like him. He said, ***“I am the good shepherd.”*** But he went on to add something unique about this good shepherd, and that is, ***“The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.”***

Think back to the Old Testament story of David and Goliath, David’s father, Jesse, sent him to the front lines to check on his brothers, and there, overlooking the Valley of Elah, David first saw the great Philistine giant, Goliath, and heard for himself how Goliath ridiculed the people of God. So, David went to King Saul and offered to fight Goliath single-handedly, but Saul only laughed and said, ***“... for you are but a youth, and he (Goliath) has been a man of war from his youth.”*** (1 Samuel 17:33) But David said, ***“Your servant used to keep sheep for his father. And when there came a lion, or a bear, and took a lamb from the flock, I went after him and struck him and delivered it out of his mouth. And if he arose against me, I caught him by his beard and struck him and killed him.”*** (1 Samuel 17:34-35).

Well, you know the rest of the story: David walked out into battle with Goliath with nothing but his slingshot and his confidence in the power of God. He picked up five smooth stones from the creek bed and, with deadly aim, hit Goliath right between the eyes and brought him tumbling down to the ground. By God’s grace, David saved the people of Israel from the hands of the Philistines, and, in time, David became the greatest king they had ever known.

So this Good Shepherd, Jesus, lays down his life for the sheep. He’s willing to fight off predators to protect the sheep, weather ferocious storms to keep them safe, and traverse rough wilderness to find the one that’s gone astray and bring it safely back to the fold. More than that – he was willing to die for them!

Does this description of the Good Shepherd remind you of anyone you know besides Jesus? I wouldn’t be surprised if many of you were thinking to yourself, “Hey, that sounds like my mother!”

Mothers are nurturing, to be sure, but when someone threatens to hurt one of their children, watch out! Stand back! When it comes to their children, mothers are fearless! They have the patience of Job, the persistence of Jeremiah, and the perseverance of Paul to withstand adversity and overcome any obstacle to protect and provide for their children. Blessed are the single moms that protect 2 or 3 sons or daughters. Her children depend on her, and she doesn’t disappoint. Anytime – it doesn’t matter. She’s there for her kids. *What more can I say?* Mothers are like that.

The Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. Jesus goes on to contrast the Good Shepherd with a hired hand. He says, ***“He who is a hired hand, and not a shepherd, who doesn’t own the sheep, sees the wolf coming, leaves the sheep, and flees. The wolf snatches the sheep and scatters them. The hired hand flees because he is a hired hand and doesn’t care for the sheep.”*** (John 10:12-13)

Have you ever had a ***“fair-weather friend”*** who was fun to be with, but when the going got rough, and you needed understanding and support, that person was nowhere to be found? All of us have had friends like that sometimes.

A fair-weather friendship is a conditional friendship. It works if we are keeping our friend happy. But when things go awry, as they often do, and you need someone to lean on, someone to be there for you – that’s when you know who your real friends are. True friendship is unconditional and unrestrained. It says, ***“I love you,”*** not when, or if, or because, but simply, ***“I love you.”***

The hired hand sees trouble coming and is nowhere to be found. He flees – he heads out of town, as you say in English – because he’s a hired hand – he is a fair-weather friend – and he really doesn’t care about the sheep at all; he’s only in it for himself, and for the paycheck. By contrast, Jesus, the Good Shepherd is there for us through thick and thin. The Good Shepherd is there for us when we have nowhere else to turn. And this is what I hope you’ll get out of the sermon this morning, when Jesus says, **“I am the good shepherd,”** he not only invites us to trust him and know that he’ll be there for us; he invites us to become more Christ-like ourselves and to be there for each other as good shepherds in his name.

I don’t know of a more important quality in a church than this, to offer sympathy and support in times of crisis – to visit someone who’s sick, to take a meal over to someone who’s had a death in the family, to listen to someone who’s lost his job or just broken up with her boyfriend, to offer help to someone who’s home has been damaged by a storm. It’s at times like these that the church is at its best, and we show forth the strength of Jesus’ promise.

This is what happens when we become good shepherds to others in the name of Jesus Christ. Transformation occurs, not only for those for whom we care but for us as well. A caring church is vibrant and alive, and we taste for ourselves the first fruits of eternal life. And so, listen to these precious words of Scripture once more and let them sink deep into your heart: **“I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep.”** (John 10:14-15).

Dear friends, **THEY WILL KNOW WE ARE CHRISTIANS BY OUR LOVE!** In Jesus’ name, the Good Shepherd. Amen.

#### **GOD IS MY SHEPHERD**

*:: God is my shepherd. I am His lamb.*

*God is my keeper. I’m in His hand.*

*My ev’ry tear He understands.*

*God is my shepherd. I am His lamb. ::*